THOUGHTS

ON A

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM.

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THOUGHTS, &c.

THE great object of a parliamentary reform I take to be this, to procure a parliament totally independent on the crown and its miniſters; in which no member ſhall be intimidated by power, ſeduced by hopes, or

corrupted by intereſt: this ſeems at preſent to be the chief purſuit of all our political doctors; the grand ſpecific which alone can cure all our national diſorders, and reſtore our broken conſtitution to its original vigour.

On this important ſubject two queſtions offer themſelves for our conſideration; firſt, What are the moſt likely means to obtain ſuch a parliament; and ſecondly, What would be the effects of it if obtained.

For

For the firſt, innumerable have been the ſchemes preſented to the public by real and pretended patriots, that is, by thoſe who have more honeſty than ſenſe, and thoſe who have more ſenſe than honeſty. Some have been for ſhortening the duration of parliaments to three, and ſome to one year: ſome have recommended voting by ballot, as the moſt effectual method to put an end to bribery; others have diſapproved it as inconſiſtent with that open avowal which ought to accompany every act of a Britiſh freeman: ſome have propoſed to

annihilate all the ſmall and corrupt boroughs, and to add the ſame number of repreſentatives which they now ſend to the ſeveral counties: ſome to add to the counties, and not to disfranchiſe the boroughs; others to aboliſh the boroughs, without any addition to the counties: ſome to enlarge, and ſome to diminiſh the qualifications of the electors; and others to require no qualification at all, but to allow every man a vote, who is not diſqualified by nature, for want of reaſon, or by law, for the commiſſion of ſome crime:

crime: but as very few have agreed in any one of theſe propoſitions, and no one has been able to form any ſatisfactory plan out of them all, I ſhall not here enter into any diſcuſſion of their merits, or make any compariſon between them; but ſhall only ſay, that of all theſe plans, that of giving a right of voting univerſally, together with annual elections, appears to be the moſt uniform, conſiſtent, and effectual: it has indeed one capital defect, which is, that it is abſolutely and utterly impracticable; but I do not mention this as

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an objection, ſo far from it, that I think it is its chief excellence, and is what induces me to prefer it to all the reſt.

To be convinced of the impracticability of this ſcheme, let us but figure to ourſelves multitudes of all deſcriptions and denominations called out to exerciſe their right of voting, inflamed by conteſt and intoxicated by liquor; laborers and manufacturers of every kind, above and under ground; weavers from their looms, and miners from tinneries, and coal-pits; ſailors

ſailors from their ſhips, and ſoldiers from their quarters;—to whom we muſt add, thouſands of thieves, ſmugglers, rogues, vagabonds, and vagrants: I ſay, let us figure to ourſelves all theſe reſpectable electors let looſe in one day throughout every part of the kingdom, and ſuch a ſcene of confuſion, of drunkenneſs and riot, of rapine, murder, and conflagration, will preſent itſelf, as muſt ſhock us with horror, even in imagination.

Nor would it be poſſible to carry on, or ever to conclude elections

in which the voters are ſo innumerable, and conſequently ſo unknown. They muſt be polled in one of theſe two ways; they muſt either be admitted only to vote in the pariſhes to which they belong, or permitted to be polled in whatever place they happened, or choſe to be at the time of the election: ſhould the firſt of theſe methods be adopted, the acceptance or rejection of every vote might be attended with the trial of a ſettlement, and counſel learned in the law be heard on both ſides: if the latter, crowds ſo

numerous,

numerous, and ſo unknown to the candidates, and all whom they could employ to poll them, would preſs into every place, where money and liquor flowed in the greateſt abundance, that the chief part of them might vote in ten different places, or ten times in the ſame place undiſcovered; and if theſe elections were annual, one could not be finiſhed before the other began.

ANOTHER reaſon, which perſuades me that this ſcheme is impracticable, is, that I cannot

foreſee any claſs of men whoſe intereſt or inclination would not induce them to oppoſe it: the landed gentleman would not much approve, that every pauper, gypſy, vagrant, and leaſt of all every poacher, ſhould enjoy as great a ſhare in the legiſlature as himſelf; the city of London will never conſent that every drayman, hackney-coachman, and chimney-ſweeper, ſhould be veſted with as good a vote as the lord mayor and aldermen, nor the livery be deſirous of admitting ſo numerous an addition to their reſpectable fraternity: the

the corporations throughout the kingdom, will never ſubmit to have their conſequence annihilated by a participation of their privileges with ſo innumerable a multitude; nor do I think that very multitude, or the people at large, would be extremely zealous to ſupport it: at firſt, indeed, when they are told, that they ſhall all be legiſlators, obliged to obey no laws but of their own making, nor pay any taxes but of their own impoſing, and that every one of them ſhall have as good a vote for a parliament-man as the Squire

or the parſon, and recollect that this vote has ever been as good as ready money; they will perhaps be a little elated and delighted with their new acquiſition; but when they are better informed, and underſtand, that the intent of this ſcheme is to prevent all bribery and corruption, and will preclude them from receiving one ſhilling or one dram of gin for their votes, they will reject this uſeleſs donation with contempt; and there will not be a tinker, who will not chooſe rather to mend a kettle for ſix-pence, than

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the conſtitution for nothing, nor a laborer, who will not make faggots rather than laws, nor a pick-pocket, who will not prefer the exerciſe of his profeſſion at an election to giving his vote.

But was this ſcheme of univerſal repreſentation, or any other of the propoſed plans of reformation practicable, and purſued, certain I am, that they would not in the leaſt contribute to the great end, which is the formation of an independent parliament, becauſe reaſon does not perſuade me,

me, that electors the moſt ignorant and profligate, the moſt neceſſitous and venal, would return members more incorrupt than the preſent; nor does experience teach me, that ten or twenty conſtituents would chuſe repreſentatives leſs able or leſs honeſt than ten or twenty thouſand. I am firmly convinced, both by reaſon and long experience, that no alteration in the mode of election, or in the electors themſelves, would produce any change in the elected; in them lies the ſource of the evil, which no external application can

approach: whether they are choſen by a greater or a leſs number, by counties or boroughs, by the rich or by the poor, by ballot or by audible voices, the parliament, when aſſembled, will be juſt the ſame; different modes of election may make ſome difference in the trouble and expence of the candidates, and may differently affect the morals of the people, and the peace of the country, but will make no difference in the repreſentative body when brought together, and it is of little ſignification by what means they come there:

there: the majority of any legiſlative aſſembly, conſiſting of five hundred and fifty members, in the ſame circumſtances and ſituation, will infallibly act in the ſame manner; if their ſituations differ, their proceedings will differ with them. In the weakneſs of infant ſtates, and in perilous times, they will be more intent on the ſafety of the community, becauſe their own is immediately included in it; but when the danger is removed, they will be more influenced by the views of intereſt and ambition, they will ſplit into factions

tions and parties, and liſt under contending leaders, and ſometimes prefer their intereſt or their own to that of their country. Their corruption will always increaſe in proportion to their power, becauſe they have more to ſell and are more neceſſary to be bought. Thoſe who cannot make ſhift with ſuch a parliament, muſt have none, becauſe it is impoſſible for any mode of election, or ſpecies of electors, to chooſe a better, unleſs they could make men, as well as members.

LET us now ſee what would be the effects of this independent parliament, if obtained. By an independent parliament, in the language of the preſent times, is to be underſtood a parliament in which the majority would oppoſe any adminiſtration: now no arguments are neceſſary to prove, that with ſuch a parliament no public buſineſs whatever could be tranſacted, nor any government ſubſiſt. But it will be ſaid, this is not what is wiſhed for, but one in which the members ſhall be always ready to ſupport the meaſures of miniſters,

niſters, when right, and to reſiſt them when wrong, unawed, and uninfluenced, and guided only by the dictates of their own judgment and conſcience. This indeed is what every wiſe man would deſire, but no wiſe man will expect to ſee, as no ſuch aſſembly, if numerous, ever exiſted in this or in any country, from the beginning of the world to the preſent hour, nor ever can, unleſs mankind were melted down, and run in a new mould: as they are now formed, in every numerous aſſembly there muſt be ſome who have

no judgment, and others who have no conſcience, and ſome who have neither: take away ſelf-intereſt, and all theſe will have no ſtar to ſteer by, but muſt ſail without a compaſs, juſt as the gales of favour, or reſentment, of popular abſurdity, or their own ſhall direct them; a miniſter therefore muſt be poſſeſſed of ſome attractive influence, to enable him to draw together theſe diſcordant particles, and unite them in a firm and ſolid majority, without which he can purſue no meaſures of public utility with ſteadineſs or ſucceſs.

ceſs. An independent Houſe of Commons is no part of the Engliſh conſtitution, the excellence of which conſiſts in being compoſed of three powers, mutually dependent on each other; of theſe, if any one was to become independent of the other two, it muſt engroſs the whole power to itſelf, and the form of our government would be immediately changed. This an independent Houſe of Commons actually performed in the laſt century, murdered the king, annihilated the peers, and eſtabliſhed the worſt

kind

kind of democracy that ever exiſted; and the ſame confuſion would infallibly be repeated, ſhould we ever be ſo unfortunate as to ſee another.

A NUMEROUS aſſembly uninfluenced is as much a creature of the imagination, as a griffin or a dragon; the one created by the poets, the other by ignorant or deſigning politicians. Parliaments have ever been influenced, and by that means our conſtitution has ſo long ſubſiſted; but the end and nature of that influence is

perpetually miſrepreſented and miſunderſtood. They are ſeldom, very ſeldom, bribed to injure their country, becauſe it is ſeldom the intereſt of miniſters to injure it; but the great ſource of corruption is, that they will not ſerve it for nothing. Men get into parliament in purſuit of power, honors, and preferments, and until they obtain them, determine to obſtruct all buſineſs, and to diſtreſs government; but happily for their country, they are no ſooner gratified, than they

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are equally zealous to promote the one, and ſupport the other.

UPON the whole, under the ſame mode of elections, and under parliaments not leſs influenced than the preſent, this nation has not only ſubſiſted for many years, but arrived at the ſummit of wealth, honor, power, and dominion, and might ſtill have preſerved them, if the means of that influence had been ſufficient to ſatisfy the demands of ambition, and the hunger of faction.

But

But even now, if we ſurvey the condition of every country on the globe, and compare it with our own, we ſhall find abundant reaſon to be contented: there are in it ſome evils, and much good, which is the utmoſt which any human inſtitution will admit of. We have, indeed, too much oratory, too much liberty, too much debt, and too many taxes; but then we have plenty, and may have peace, if we pleaſe: we have ſecurity to our perſons and properties, and excellent laws, juſtly, though not very cheaply adminiſtered; we have

a parliament not worſe, and a king a great deal better than we deſerve, and therefore I ſhall conclude with the words of Shakeſpear,

'Tis better ſure, to bear the ills we know,
Than fly to others, which we know not of.

FINIS.